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Contact: Stanley Young
916-653-5792**CALIFORNIA RESOURCES SECRETARY OBJECTS TO
INTERIOR RULE ON WILDERNESS****New Interpretation Prevents “Cherished Emblems” of California, including Headwaters
and Giant Sequoia Groves-- from Wilderness Protection**

SACRAMENTO — Mary Nichols, California’s Secretary for Resources, sent a letter to Interior Secretary Gale Norton today objecting to a decision by the Department of the Interior that limits wilderness reviews and protection. That decision follows an April settlement agreement between Interior and the State of Utah that caps potential wilderness designations to those reviewed prior to 1993.

“The result of compelling California to accept this settlement with Utah,” Secretary Nichols stated in her letter, “permanently denies wilderness protection to a range of cherished emblems of California’s natural heritage -- including Giant Sequoia groves, and stands of ancient redwoods in the Headwaters Forest. “

The settlement, which was negotiated between Interior and the State of Utah without any participation by California or other states, limits the Bureau of Land Management from establishing, managing or otherwise treating public lands, other than those already designated prior to 1993, as Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs), or wilderness, without congressional authorization.

Sec. Nichols stated in her letter that this unprecedented interpretation of the law “marks a significant departure from existing jurisprudence and the policies of every president since Jimmy Carter.” As a result, lands added to the federal estate after 1993 will not now be managed or even studied as potential wilderness areas. For California this means that the Headwaters Forest-- purchased in 1999 for \$480 million including \$130 million in State funds – is now excluded from wilderness protection even though BLM’s own 2002 draft plan for the forest recommended that more than half of Headwaters be designated a WSA.

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“For California the situation has come to this: not one acre, not a single giant redwood in the ancient groves of Headwaters can now be considered, let alone managed, as a Wilderness Study Area under the terms of a settlement Interior entered into with another state.” The Payne Ranch, sheltering the second-largest wintering bald eagle population in California, and acquired after 1993 will now also not be managed or considered for wilderness protection.

The new interpretation of wilderness protection, noted Sec. Nichols, also means that “lands that the BLM has *already* decided meet the definition of ‘wilderness,’ such as giant sequoia groves adjacent to Kings Canyon National Park, are now automatically downgraded to lesser levels of protections.” Carrizo Plain National Monument, where BLM had just begun its wilderness review, will also be affected by the new interpretation.

“This approach to the management of our priceless natural legacy, magnificent landscapes, and important biological heritage runs counter to all notions of open government and sound public policy,” stated Sec. Nichols in her letter. “It excludes states from involvement in, or comment on, decisions regarding priceless natural resources within their borders. It shatters the expectations of average citizens that the federal government will protect as wilderness lands of extraordinary beauty and biological importance.”

Secretary Nichols called on Interior to direct BLM to continue to review its holdings – including recent and future acquisitions--for wilderness designation as it had in the past, and asked Secretary Norton to direct the BLM to encourage Californians to share information they have on the wilderness values of public lands as it prepares new land use plans. “When it comes to wilderness protection,” wrote Secretary Nichols, “nothing less than the preservation of our most priceless landscapes and natural legacy is at stake.”

For full text of the letter see: <http://resources.ca.gov/NortonLetter-071003.pdf>

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